

How People Cope

Every person reacts differently and it is not unusual for feelings to change from day to day. Some survivors may deny or ignore their experience initially and seem to go on like nothing happened. In these ways of managing difficult experiences, the survivor seems initially untouched by their experience until a later date (possibly days, weeks, months or years). There is no time limit for addressing an experience of sexual misconduct and survivors are encouraged to seek help when they are ready, regardless of the elapsed time. The anniversary of an assault or the tiniest thing can trigger a memory for someone who has tried to keep it out of awareness for a long time. Some survivors are unable or unwilling to think of themselves as a victim and continue to deny or minimize their experience, or reframe it in a way that seems more manageable but it is always important to remember that the perpetrator is responsible for the assault, not the survivor. No one is forced to assault someone else, it was their decision to proceed with the offense.

Sometimes survivors have difficulty with eating or sleeping. Some may find it hard to concentrate and stay focused which often adds additional stress when academic assignments are incomplete. Some feel "ambushed" by intrusive, unwanted and often critical or frightening thoughts that are hard to process, and continue to feel that things are out of their control when they are unable to manage these feelings.

Most people find it hard to talk to friends and family about their experience. It is important for survivors to seek help when they are ready. If a friend or family member has difficulty hearing about this experience or seems to be questioning any part of it, this says something about the one who is listening, not the survivor.

Strategies for self-care

Health-promoting self-care is often a challenge for many people and it can be especially difficult for survivors of sexual assault, incest, sexual abuse, stalking and/or intimate partner violence. It can also be an important part of the restorative process. Survivors are encouraged to be kind and caring to themselves, especially now, when they may often feel defeated and down.

- Physical activity can help give a survivor a break from relentless thoughts while increasing their oxygen intake and renewing their reliance on their own physical ability. Certain levels of activity also release endorphins, which can provide a sense of well-being and lead to better sleep patterns.
- Eating well and in regular patterns can help survivors feel alert, stay focused, while also facilitating better sleep. Medical care is also important, especially through stressful periods when the immune system can be highly taxed. It is important for survivors to give themselves time to adjust to a new awareness of the world that includes an experience of sexual assault. This may take weeks, months or years but it is important to be patient with oneself through this process. Everyone is different and there is no right or wrong way to deal with such an experience. SHARE counselors can help with this process as well, and assist you with individual coping strategies.

Concrete ideas

- Eat healthy foods and get exercise to help keep your strength up.
- Say positive things to yourself to help restore your sense of well-being. Use phrases like "I'm strong," "I did not deserve this," "I am taking back my personal power," "I am healing each and every day."
- Try to do the things you have always enjoyed.
- Don't look for simple answers to explain what happened.
- Believe in yourself and know that you will get through this.
- Focus on what you are feeling rather than the actual details of what happened.
- Try not to let others make decisions for you.

Take your time

- Be patient with yourself. It takes time to move on. Healing is physical, emotional and psychological.
- It is not necessary to talk about the incident all at once. Take your time and do so in a way that feels comfortable.
- If talking is difficult try drawing or writing things down.
- Some people find it useful to keep a journal, or to write stories or poems.

Seek help from professionals and friends

- Know your rights and how to get the help you need.
- Seeking professional help enables you to express your thoughts and feelings in a neutral setting where you do not feel that you have to protect the listener or be concerned about how the other person is feeling.
- Some survivors find it helpful to tell a trusted friend.